

The Principles of Landscape Design

Randolph Townsend Wedding, Landscape Architect, St. Petersburg, Fla.

Fineness of relation is the basis of all art and "Simplicity is the keynote of all great art."

Nowhere does the happy combination of simplicity and fine relations produce such magic results as in the fine art of landscape designing.

Good art of any kind demands good composition. The basic principles of design are found in the masterpieces, not only of painting and sculpture, but of poetry, eloquence, music, architecture, pottery, etc. All owe their beauty to that fineness of relation established by good design.

A good piece of landscape design is rarely an accident. The laws of beauty have been established and only by working in accordance with these principles can we create beauty with certainty.

Good sense and good taste are not synonymous, although at first sight they seem to be. The ability to enjoy does not necessarily presuppose the ability to create. And, certainly, until we have mastered the alphabet of good taste, we should employ the trained artist to design our plantings. Many planting problems are simple; and it is with the hope of helping the public to plan without professional aid, where their problem is not complicated, that the present shortened

analysis of planting principles is offered. Appreciation is the only highway to the temple of art. Analysis of beauty by its fundamental laws will induce the ability to create. Imitation and caprice bring no increase of power.

There appears to be a general conviction among the builders of homes that the assistance of a trained architect is necessary. That this assistance has been beneficial is easily seen by comparing the homes of today with those of 100 years ago. This is the tangible triumph of the specialist. For various reasons, this tendency to use trained designers has not become so universal in the improvement of the surroundings of the home. The bare and cheerless aspect of so many houses shows that their owners lack proper appreciation of the value of the landscape designer and, frequently, even of the value of the plants.

But the large and increasing number of people of culture who are availing themselves of the specialist in securing the maximum of beauty in the setting of their homes and the beauty of many places already at maturity, which are an inspiration alike to the landscape designer and to the client, are sufficient proof that the American people can and do appreciate the merit of good designing when af-

forded an opportunity to compare it with the indifferent results attained by the untrained.

Great landscape designers, like great poets and painters, are born, not made; but these sons of destiny must work faithfully to be able to express themselves perfectly. We cannot all be Reptons or Olmsteads; but we can easily acquire the power to work a vast and beneficent change in the appearance of our homes if we will study a few of the main principles of beautifying the home. By intelligent study, we increase our ability to enjoy not merely our own, but the worthy plantings of everybody else.

Composition, then, of all kinds, is the "putting together" of lines, masses and colors to produce a harmony and this building up of a harmony is the fundamental goal of the supreme artists of all time.

The groundwork of all composition is proportion, and in landscape design this is known as *space composition*. The feeling for space composition is the chief difference in the work of the masters of landscape and that of the worthy plodder. The element of proportion enters into every tiny bit of every plan. The proper amount of foliage mass as against the open lawn, the size of the plants and the location of them; the color scheme; everything, in fact, in any composition must be subordinated to proportion, or *space composition*.

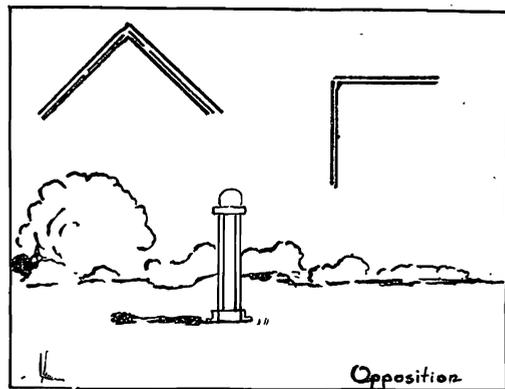
Subordinated to space composition, we have only five basic principles of beauty. They are present, in every worthy design

in the world, either singly or in combinations.

They are:

1. *Opposition.*
2. *Transition.*
3. *Subordination.*
4. *Repetition.*
5. *Symmetry.*

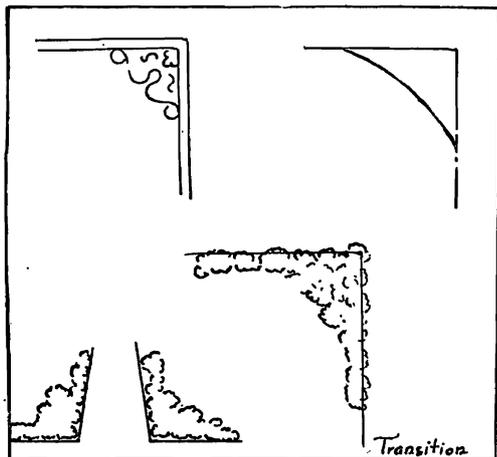
To some of you, no doubt, the names are meaningless as terms of art; but let us see how infallibly they appear in every work of art you know. Let us analyze them so we can recognize them wherever they may appear, and the grand result will be that we will attack problems of art and good design with loving interest and a growing ability to solve them, instead of timidly believing that a work of art requires the hand of a heaven-sent genius. Remember that genius in most cases means only an "infinite capacity for taking pains."



1. *Opposition*: "Two lines meeting form a simple and severe harmony."

"Examples are found in Greek doorways, Egyptian temples and early Renais-

sanct architecture; in plaid design; and in landscape where vertical lines cut the horizon, such as trees, walls of buildings, etc."



2. *Transition*: This involves a step beyond Opposition.

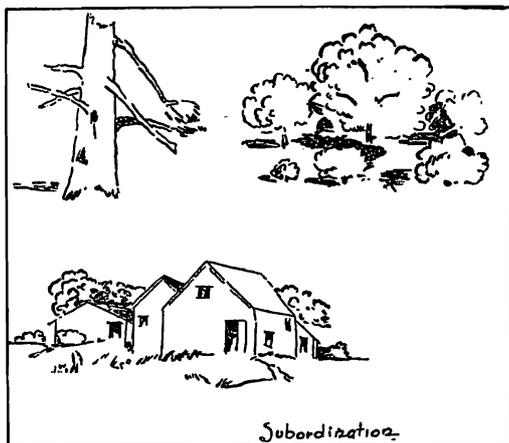
"Two straight lines meeting in opposing directions give an impression of abruptness, severity, or even violence; the difference of movement being emphasized. If a third line is added, the opposition is softened and an effect of unity and completeness produced."

This combination typifies beauty itself which has been defined as "Elements of difference harmonized by elements of unity."

"Examples of Transition are the bracket, where the straight line is modified into curves which may be elaborated in great detail."

Instead of a drawn line of transition, there may be only a suggestion of one; *a softening of the corner angle* is the important thing in Transition. "In pictorial

art, the vignette; in architecture, the capital are examples of this. Accidental transitions occur in the branching of old trees where the rhythmic lines are unified."



3. *Subordination*: "Neither of the foregoing principles is often found alone as the basis of a single work. Transition in particular, usually serves to harmonize the various parts of a composition. Subordination is a great constructive idea in all arts."

"To form a complete group the parts are attached or related to a single dominating element which determines the character of the whole."

A tree trunk with its branches is a good type of this kind of harmony, the relation of principal and subordinate, down to the veining of the leaves, a multitude of parts organized into a simple whole. "Subordination is the principal element in the spacing and line rhythm of the cathedrals of Salisbury, of St. Maclou of Rouen and the Taj Mahal; in Millet's *Goose-girl*; in some Byzantine design and

Persian rugs. It governs the distribution of masses in dark-and-light composition, and of hues in color composition. It appears in poetry (The Odyssey for example) in the subordination of all parts to the main idea. It is used in musical composition."

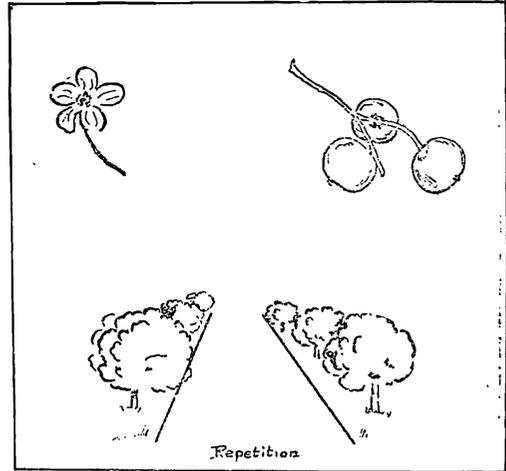
"Whenever unity is to be evolved from complexity, confusion reduced to order, power felt, then will be applied the creative principle called Subordination." This principle may be applied in three ways:

1. "By grouping about an axis, as leaf to stem, branches to trunk."
2. "By radiation, as in flowers, the rosette, vault ribs, the anthemion."
3. "By size, as in a group of mountain peaks, a cathedral with its spire and pinnacles, tree clusters, or oriental rug with center and border."

Mere geometric radiation or conventional branching is only commonplace. A work of fine art constructed upon the principle of Subordination has all its parts related by delicate adjustments and balance of proportions, tone and color. A change in one member changes the whole.

4. *Repetition*: This name indicates the opposite of Subordination. "It produces beauty by repeating the same lines in rhythmic order." The intervals may be equal or unequal, as in patterns or as in landscape.

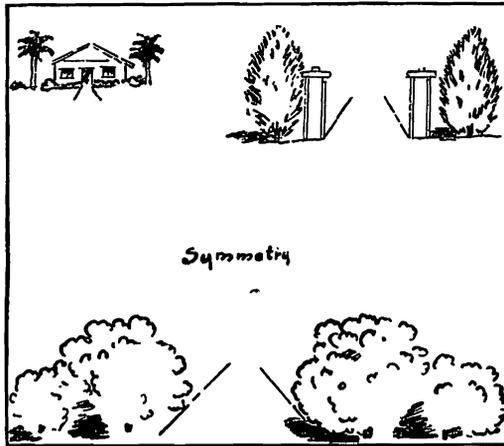
"This is the most common and probably the oldest form of design. It seems almost instinctive, perhaps derived from the rhythms of breathing and walking, or



the movement of ripples and rolling waves. Repetition is the basis of all music and poetry. The savage has a drum to mark the rhythm of his sacred dance. From the crude rhythm of the Australian song 'Eat; Eat; Eat,' the world has moved towards the supreme." This movement gave us the verse of Sappho, probably the most beautiful sounds ever produced in language. The march of Repetition has carried us from rude patterns marked on bowls with sticks, to the jewel patterns of the Moguls and the colonnade of the Parthenon.

Repetition alone may be like doggerel rhyme, but with fine space composition becomes a builder of art fabric.

5. *Symmetry*: "The most common and obvious way of satisfying the desire for order is to place two equal lines or shapes in exact balance, as in a gable, windows each side of a door, or objects on a shelf. This term applies to three and four-part groups, or anywhere bal-



ance is made; but roughly it refers to a two-part arrangement. It is illustrated in the human body, ships, furniture, books, etc." But Symmetry without proportion is cheap unless due regard is paid to beauty of form. It produces an effect of repose and completeness, it is severely beautiful, as in a Greek vase. Its chief use in landscape is to give balance and is found necessary in developing a formal garden.

These five principles, singly or together, are the basis of all good art. When we see that art is not complex and mysterious and that the experience of all artists has led them to accept these principles as representing the best, it becomes easy for us to design a landscape with assurance and with power.

We will now take up the vital points in producing a beautiful planting and will show how these points, agreed on by the great landscape designers, conform in the minutest detail to the five principles we have just discussed.

The first step in making a home is

building the house. In designing the house the size of the grounds, the elevation, the contours and the surroundings should all be studied carefully beforehand and the site should be selected and then we are ready to make an intelligent study of the house design. To secure the highest utility the house should be built to fit the most desirable approaches, and above all, it should have a proper proportion with the size of the grounds and there should be provision for enough open lawn to secure good space composition when everything is finished. By space composition we here mean that the group of masses should be skillfully interwoven with the group of open spaces.

When the house, outbuildings, pergolas, fences, etc., are built, we have different lines converging with the line of the ground and this is *Opposition*. The good architect who makes house and subsidiary buildings of the same type is consciously, or unconsciously, working in *Subordination* and *Repetition*.

The landscape architect always provides a planting in the house border to harmonize in size and in color with the house itself. He will not put trees in the house border of the little cottage nor will he plant geraniums in the border of the big one. There must be a proper relation between the size of the house and lot and the plants used with them. I have seen a little house shrinking away from one large date palm that threatened to smother it, and I have seen a three-story house with a house border of phlox 6 inches high. The border planting should be of sufficient size to provide adequate

Transition from the house to the grass. No house "fits the ground" unless it has this transition.

The angles made by houses, fences, or by walks and drives should be planted, no matter where they occur, and this planting, which is done by all landscape designers, is called by us *Transition*.

The heavy plantings of a lawn should be in the house border, chiefly of shrubs, and on or near the property line, where we may first plant a hedge, if desired, then plant tall trees, then smaller and finally shrubs in edge facing the house. This gives transition with the trees and gives finish to the tree mass and, finally, furnishes good *Subordination* to the dominant mass of the house. It has been said that "a lawn without grass is like a man without a face." It is certainly true that we do not need argument to convince us that the place with a carpet of grass to connect the house border with the heavier plantings near the property line is more beautiful than one without it; but few know that the grass is vitally necessary to give unity to the *Subordination* of the whole layout.

Much stress is laid on the use of native plants in landscape composition and this is right, not because some great authority says it, but because if a house is to fit its surroundings, the plants themselves must give proper *Repetition*.

We hear much about color schemes, some saying color is of prime importance, others saying that it is not worth considering; but let us look into it from the standpoint of *Subordination*.

Colors can and should be grouped like trees and under the same principle, that there be come dominant color with which the rest should be associated and in harmony. Study the great paintings of the world and you will find this true. Color grouping is just as important, but not so noticeable as the grouping of the buildings and plants.

When we plant the salients and produce deeper bays and recesses, we certainly make things more beautiful; but we are merely accenting *Space Composition* and *Transition*. Shrubs at the salient certainly give transition to the lawn and providing spaces of *different size* in the right place is the acme of space composition.

In the small city lot and frequently in the country where there is plenty of room, it is sometimes best with symmetrical houses to plant with *Symmetry*. Walks and drives are best as a usual thing near the border of the property and in *Repetition* with the plantings, but sometimes the *symmetrical* entrance is best, as the half circle walk or drive terminating with the house at the apex. Lay-outs like this can and should be planted symmetrically; trees or shrubs in pairs, or with masses balanced. The symmetrical treatment is the well-known formal garden. This should never be attempted except with a house that will justify it.

The finest streets in the world are planted with the same tree, as near as possible of the same size and at uniform distances. All other treatment of streets is cheap and amateurish. The street is a fixed line, consequently no opportunity

offers to introduce space composition; the curb forbids. Repetition will make this street beautiful like nothing else, it gives it simplicity, dignity, adds to the apparent length and no other arrangement so thoroughly satisfies.

Study the needs of your home; work out the color scheme, the texture, the massing, the light and shade. Design it on paper and, as you design it, test the

worth of the design by those basic principles which govern all good designs.

When you have done the best you can, then plant it, trusting the bountiful hand of Mother Nature to reward your efforts with unexpected loveliness, with light and shade, with color, with texture you never dreamed of when you designed it, and, more, she will generously spread a curtain of green leaves over your mistakes.